ELTON at the Royal Variety Show . . .

The Madman dashes across the water ...3000 miles, £15,000 and 25 million people

ELTON and LEGS on stage during the American tour. U.S. pics by David Larkham, Palladium pic by Robert Ellis

JULIE WEBB catches up with a tired ELTON JOHN

POOR OLD Elton John, that particular Sunday wasn't the best day to return to Britain. His plane touched down a mere five minutes before the Jackson 5 flight, and he made his exit past customs to be faced with hordes of agitated teenybops.

Teenybops aren't really his line. "When we played Glasgow on the last tour we had about a 1,000 teenyboppers clambering on the car, which was terrifying. My God.

"But at the airport they were all there for the Jackson 5 and the Osmonds and we just walked right into the middle of it all. Apparently some had been there half the night, or so the police told us. What a stupid thing — they'd been broadcasting about the 200 free T shirts — they should give all the kids T shirts or none at all. It's such a hype."

Later that day, Elton went along to rehearse for the Royal Variety Show. The equipment failed to turn up and, finding himself at a loose end, Elton suddenly had the national Press swarming around him eager for titillating gossip.

Then they kept asking stupid questions like, "How do you get on with Jack Jones?" ("Never met him, was the reply.) Or, "What do you think of Liberace?"

Having been some 49 hours without sleep, the logical move would have been to go home and get some rest. Elton's publicist lady was concerned for his welfare. Elton, on the other hand was just being a bit cussed.

Whether it was true or not, he should never have said: "I'm here to do the show because 25 million people will be able to listen to my latest record and it will be the only chance I've got to plug it."

His publicist nearly died when he came out with that. Elton was unrepentent after the reporters had dispersed. Little sleep, and such stupid questions, warranted such a quote, he reasoned. And reporters who ended with the question: "And what is your latest record called?" deserved no better treatment.

IN ORDER to make the Royal Variety Show, Elton had to shuffle round several gigs on his American tour and cancel out completely in Phoenix. He estimated the cost of his return to Britain at "around £25,000" — then when those around him gazed in amazement he added, "Well it might be £15,000 — a lot of money anyway."

Was it worth it?

"You know me, I'm crazy.I had a vision of coming out and doing 'Think I'm Going To Kill Myself' with Legs (Larry) coming on wearing a crash helmet with a wedding couple on top, so I thought why not?

"You see, we've been doing a lot of outrageous things in America. One particular number we include is 'Singing In The Rain' — Legs and I have a back track which the band recorded and we have a mock pianist in a complete tail suit and a hunchback who throws glitter over us.

"We sing the song wearing macs and trench coats, and the kids just love it. In Los Angeles we had eight dancers and midgets — the lot.

"Larry comes on as a wedding man in 'Think I'm Going To Kill Myself' and tap dances.

"During 'Singing In The Rain' we littered confetti over 17 thousand people — they just couldn't believe it, all of a sudden the whole place looked like a ticker-tape welcome."

Returning to the subject of the Royal Variety Show, Elton agrees that he was a strange choice.

"I knew about it before I went to America but wasn't allowed to tell anyone. But then I didn't really believe it — I never believe anything until I see it in writing.

"We finally got the letter in America, and I was still really surprised because I thought if they were going to choose anybody it was going to be someone like the New Seekers or Gilbert O'Sullivan.

"I suppose, though, I was an obvious candidate in a way — they would never choose a Slade or a T. Rex because they are not into that at all, which is sad.

"It's so boring, the sound will probably be dreadful. It's going to be chaos. It's chaos already. But I've never done anything like this before."

THE NEW SINGLE, plugs or no plugs, is already in the charts here. It's come in for a certain amount of criticism, however, in that it sounds like a rip off from a variety of different singles put out in the late fifties/early sixties.

"I wanted it to be a record about all the things I grew up with," counters Elton, "like Bobby Vee for instance. I wanted it to sound like it does. Of course it's a rip off, it's completely derivative in every sense of the word.

"It's just something I've always wanted to do and after 'Honky Cat' we could get away with it. If we'd released it after 'Rocket Man' I think people would have been a bit shocked.

"I just wanted to release something different. And this gets me out of the old . . . well you know what I mean. It's just tongue in check, a bit like say 'Speedy Gonzales'.

"Actually I met Bobby Vee in Los Angeles — it really freaked me out. Bobby Vee."

Family are on the Elton John American tour. And by all accounts have been meeting with an excellent response. Yet the tour hasn't all been smooth sailing.

"The last gig we did before coming here, Family's equipment didn't turn up — anyway Linda Lewis is over there because she goes out with Jim Cregan so, poor girl, she had to go on amidst a stream of booing because Family didn't come on. But she did very well. And Family are great to tour with."

In January, a new album, "Don't Shoot Me, I'm Only The Piano Player", is scheduled for release, the same time that Elton's newly formed record company, Rocket Records, was due to start operating. But hassles are holding up the label's launch.

"The album comes out at the time I'm due in France to record another one. I haven't written any material for it at all yet — I'm going to leave that in the lap of the Gods.

"I didn't have anything worked out for the new one and it worked all right. As long as Bernie has got something I don't worry. If he hasn't, we'll forget it — it will be an album like 'Elton Plays George Gershwin'.

"The record company? Well, it's going all right, but it's just taking up so much time. It's taken us three months to find offices. But we've got our own logo sorted out.

"I don't think the label will be fully operational for about another six months. In the States my records are going out on Rocket/MCA — but a record company isn't something you can just invent overnight. Like, in the States, there's already a Rocket Publishing Company, so we've got to be known as the English D Rocket Publishing Company.

"Davy's album is nearly finsished and we've a couple of other people who we've nearly signed. But it's not fair to say who they are. Still, it's all coming along nicely."

FINALLY the strange case of mistaken identity that occured outside the Palladium.

"When we arrived there were about 20/30 people outside," explains Elton. "As I got out the car this guy looked at me and said, 'Michael, can I have your autograph?

"He kept saying Michael and I thought, 'Michael who?' Michael Bentine?

"Then I suddenly thought, Michael Jackson. But you can't mistake me for him, can you?"

If some reviewers thought Elton's voice sounded a bit tired on the Royal Variety Show, it's hardly surprising.

On the Sunday he hadn't slept for 49 hours. Sunday night he was listening to some tracks from the new album.

Starting at 9.30 a.m. on Monday, there were sound checks, an afternoon final dress rehearsal and in the evening the show.

Tuesday he went back to America to continue the tour. . .